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ABSTRACT

Phonics teaches learners how to match the letters of the alphabet to the speech sounds they already know. At age five, children who are ready to learn to read have a vocabulary of some 5,000 words and understand far more than that when they hear them. The problem is that there are 44 sounds in English and only 26 letters in the alphabet. Phonics programs begin with the most regular forms and proceed to the exceptions after the learner has grasped the general principles of how the alphabet represents the sounds of speech. Reading of sentences and stories can begin before a phonics program is completed, using sight words, adults reading to the child as the child watches the book, and bedtime books of early years memorized by the child. Over the centuries learning how to use systematic phonics has proven to be a useful way to learn to read. Phonics can be mastered in a matter of months to the point where a child can read anything he or she can understand. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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PHONICS for Learning How to Read:

Webster's Third New International Unabridged Dictionary:

phonics ¦ "a method of teaching beginners to read and pronounce words by learning the phonetic value of letters and letter groups"

phoneme ¦ "the smallest unit of speech that distinguishes one utterance from another ...pin/fin p/f

phonogram ¦ "character or symbol used to represent a word, syllable, or phoneme ... a succession of letters that occurs with the same phonetic value in several or many words (as the -ight of bright, fight, flight)

In the word SCREAM, the SCR is a succession of three phonemes; SCR is not a word, not a syllable, not one phoneme but three phonemes. If the beginner is taught the sounds of S, C, R he can sound them out, using a fescue from left-to-right, each as a phoneme. Thus he can sound out, as he meets them, all the phonic "blends" and need not learn them as separate items. In this way he learns by what he himself does rather than memorizing any more units than necessary. It is with the phonemes that the teaching of phonics begins.

Phonics teaches the learner how to match the letters of the alphabet to the speech sounds he already knows. At age five the child who is ready to learn to read talks his native language with a vocabulary of some 5,000 words and understands far more than that when he hears them, especially if he has been talked to and read to at home. If he has attended kindergarten or has had ABC books at home he may well be acquainted with the letters of the alphabet and their names. If not, learning the letters is where instruction must begin. Recited out loud, each of those letters will give some hint of how it can sound in speech, except for H and W.

Our problem is that there are 44 sounds in English and only 26 letters in the alphabet. For beginners Sir James Pitman developed the Augmented Roman alphabet, also called Initial Teaching Alphabet or i/t/a which has 44 adapted letter forms to match English speech. Without i/t/a the beginner needs to learn the adaptations made on the 26 letter alphabet to accommodate English.

In phonic programs this teaching begins with the most regular forms and proceeds to the exceptions after the learner has grasped the general principles of how the alphabet represents the sounds of speech, letter by letter, left-to-right. The early instruction is oral practice matched to written forms.

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Systematic phonic programs begin with the more regular consonants, leaving the alternate sounds of C and G until later [C cat G go at first // C city G gelatin later]. Trying to pronounce some of the consonants tends to produce an extra grunt ("buh, tuh" etc. instead of bbbb, tttt). This difficulty can be overcome as soon as the five short vowels are taught: ab eb ib ob ub, ac ec ic oc uc.... Most phonic programs teach these the short vowels at the very beginning. Difficult or not, since these five short vowels appear in some two-thirds of all English words they are worth learning early. . These short vowels are taught in simple examples: *apple, elephant, igloo,* ox, *umbrella,* as in ABC books.

With letter cards or ABC blocks the child can participate in his own instruction by building three letter words,-- one consonant, one vowel, one consonant: *cab jet lid box mud.* He can make hundreds of these three letter words while practising the two most essential rules of phonics: 1. letters represent sounds and 2. letters are sounded out left-to-right. This practicing can be done with paper and pencil, blackboard, or computer. Our ancestors used a slate.

From this point on phonics programs vary slightly in the sequence in which these items are presented:

~~~Consonant digraphs [ch, sh, th, wh, -ng] can be used in the three-letter words: *ship, chop,, thin, whip, mash, bath, that, fish, sing, sang, sung, bang,*

~~~Additional consonants (sometimes called "blends") can be added and sounded out in the three letter words: *blot, brag, slip, scrub, mend*

> The teacher who would like help can find generous examples in:
> Florence Akin: WORD MASTERY
> Bloomfield and Barnhart: LET'S READ
> Rudolf Flesch: WHY JOHNNY CAN'T READ, last 70 pages

At this point long words with short vowels can be sounded out, left-to-right with a fescue: *trumpet, umbrella, dragon, hundred, pumpkin, invent, difficult, octopus, bandit, construct, happiness, rubbish, hippopotamus, sandwich, kitchen, rocket, arithmetic.*

In all these exercises the learner can build words himself while practising those short vowels in left-to-right sounding out.

The long vowels are easier to pronounce, being the same as the name of the letter. The long vowel is signaled by the addition of a second vowel which may itself be silent: *coat, tree, pie, rain, peach.* The second vowel may be one letter away in what is called "the magic E" as in: *ride, cute, bite, tape, note.* However, when a consonant is doubled that second vowel may not push through to affect the first vowel: *hoping/hopping; liked/licked; dinner/diner.* There are, of course, exceptions to all rules. When in doubt, the learner tries both possibilities,-- but this does not include random guessing. There is no English word that is totally unphonetic. All words have phonic clues to keep the reader on track.

Reading of sentences and stories can begin before a phonic program is completed. This can be done with several tools:

~~~The learner can be taught, early on, to recognize a very limited list of function words "sight words" that are "exceptions" in their spelling. Since these are among the most used 100 words in English, it is difficult to write or find interesting stories without them. At the same time, each contains at least some phonic clue which the learner can recognize. Here is a useful list of "exception: words: *a, the, to, where, there, said, have, come, do, does, are, was, were, one, two, you, they;, who what, once.*

~~~An adult reads aloud while the child watches the book. There is a charming story about this in Harper Lee's TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD.

~~~The bedtime books of early years are often memorized by the child who later looks at his book while reciting what he remembers. Any text previously memorized, such as a poem or song, can be used in the same way.-- to see how the alphabet letters match the sounds of speech.

~~~The tape recorder can provide an oral reading to match a printed text, either purchased or created by teacher or parent. With this the learner can hear and watch how print matches sound, with whatever repetition is wanted.

~~~**Re-reading is a powerful tool,** and young children enjoy it.

Just as we use digraphs for consonant sounds which our alphabet does not provide, so also we use combinations of vowels for additional sounds. Some are spelled in more than one way. Here they are:

au/aw as in *awful, auto*
ou/ow as in *out, owl*
oi/oy as in *oil, boy*
oo as in *book* or as in *moon*
ar as in *car*
or as in *horn*
er/ir/ur sound alike, as in *jerk, dirt, curl,*

The rule for C and for G changes the pronunciation depending on if the letter that comes next is an E, an I, or a Y, like this: *cat, cent, city,*
~~~

cop, cup, bicycle, with G more irregular: *gas, get, cage, give, magic, got, gum, gym*, At times both sounds occur in the same word, depending on what letter comes next after C or G: *success, suggest, circle.*

Exceptions? yes: -ight; - ough; -ow that sounds like long O in *blow*; EA reverses to AE, as in *break*. Some of these can be learned in groups as "word families". *all, ball, call*; *old, gold, cold*; *wild, child, mild*, and so on. Some of these exceptions are troublesome because they are among our most used words. However, there is no English word that is without some phonic clues.

Over the centuries pronunciation has changed while spelling has not. Over the centuries learning how to use systematic phonics has proven to be a useful way to learn to read, Phonics is a brief subject; it can be mastered in a matter of months to the point where a child can read anything he can understand with no reference to a "grade level" or based on controlled vocabulary.

Short List for the HOW of phonics:

Akin, Florence: WORD MASTERY [Houghton Mifflin, 1913, 1941]
Ready reference for examples, indexed.
Bloomfield, Leonard and Clarence Barnhart: LET'S READ [Wayne State U, Press, 1961] Rich in phonic examples.
Chall, Jeanne: Learning to Read, the Great Debate. [McGraw Hill, 1967] Research on the success of phonics.
Flesch, Rudolf: WHY JOHNNY CAN'T READ [1955 still available in paperback, 70 pages of phonic examples
Goldsmith, Oliver: THE HISTORY OF LITTLE GOODY TWO SHOES [published by John Newbery, 1766]
Groff. Patrick: WORD RECOGNITION: WHY AND HOW [.C.C.Thomas,1987]
MacEathron, Margaret: YOUR CHILD CAN LEARN TO READ [Kenworthy,1952]
McGuffey, William: MCGUFFEY'S ECLECTIC PRIMER [American Book, 1837, 1920] All of phonics plus stories in 64 pages.
Shaw, Bernard: ON LANGUAGE [Philosophical Library, 1963]
Background for the i/t/a.
Spalding. Romalda: WRITING ROAD TO READING [Whiteside & Morrow, 1962]
Thomas, Brenda & Linda Bardof: YOU CAN READ --- a VCR video tape to play on a television set [Beta Group, Indianapolis 1990]
This offers seeing and hearing together, systematic phonics.
Webster, Noah: ELEMENTARY SPELLING BOOK [1783, 1850, 1866,1908],

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Reading with Hornbook and Fescue, 1974, 1986.